

STATEMENT REGARDING ASSISTED SUICIDE
ON BEHALF OF ARCHBISHOP SPYRIDON
OF THE GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE COMMERCE COMMITTEE
OF THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
By The Rev. Stanley S. Harakas
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(Five Minute Oral Presentation)

The Orthodox Church traces its historical continuity through the centuries to the beginnings of Christianity. Its authorities in moral issues are Holy Scripture, Church doctrine, the writings of the Church Fathers, the decisions of Church Councils, with special emphasis on the first eight centuries of the Christian era. This moral tradition is concurrently seen as representing not just the particular interests of believers, but as a model for all human life.

In Orthodox Christian perspective, the Ten Commandments are a way of expressing a fundamental and elementary moral standard that is applicable universally to all societies and all human conditions. They describe the essential foundations for the perpetuation of every society. This means that the unjust taking of life is immoral and wrong, not as a teaching applying only to Christians, but as a universal moral norm applicable to any social whole. A nation, in which people could kill and murder without moral censure, would eventually self-destruct.

Human life is thus an extremely high value. In Orthodox Christian perspective, human life is a gift from God that needs to be protected, nurtured and sanctified. We should not destroy God's gift of life. While bodily life is essential for the experience of all other values, spiritual and moral life give it fulfillment.

From this stance, an undeviating moral teaching has been maintained from the earliest period of the Church that identifies suicide with self-murder. The New Testament reaffirms the Decalogue's prohibition of murder and affirms that "no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15).

The early Christian writer Lactantius (c. 240-320) made the connection for the Church between murder and suicide, when he wrote: "If homicide is wicked because it is a destroyer of a man, he who kills himself is fettered by the same guilt because he kills a man" (The Divine Institutes. Bk. 3, ch. 18). In the Synod of Ancyra (314), the issue of voluntary and involuntary murder was legislated on (canons 22 and 23). In both cases, murderers were not permitted to receive the sacraments until a period of repentance was fulfilled.

In regard to a suicide, it was clear that there could be no

repentance for the act of self-murder, so there could be no forgiveness of the sin, and therefore the result was separation from God. Suicides, subsequently were refused a Christian funeral, with the exception of the mentally ill.

From the perspective that suicide is by definition, self-murder, "assisted suicide" becomes a contradiction in terms. To assist another to kill him or her self, is no longer self-murder, but a form of murder. It should therefore be kept illegal, as is any other form of murder.

Frequently, the justification for suicide, assisted suicide or so-called euthanasia is the suffering that a person is enduring. The Orthodox Church prays daily "for those who suffer." We also pray for "a Christian ending to our life, painless, blameless, and peaceful." Nevertheless, the Orthodox Church also affirms that there is a positive side to suffering, through which spiritual and moral maturation may come.

But when there is terminal illness, which means that there remains no reasonable hope for cure and that the dying process has begun, physicians no longer should use otherwise therapeutic procedures. Rather, the patient should be made as comfortable as possible through the administration of pain control medication in the home or in a hospice situation. For the Church, it is important that such persons be maintained as alert as possible to finalize their relationships with God, their Church, members of their family and the circle of their friends. Pain-management policies should be developed legally that will encourage physicians, health-care professionals, hospitals, Medicare, Medicaid, insurance companies and health management organizations to minimize the pain of the dying in a humane, sensitive and loving environment.

From a Greek Orthodox perspective, it is dangerous for the well being of American society if we allow the special kind of murder called assisted suicide to be legalized. Our nation should not violate the fundamental and universal moral teaching that murder is wrong. True dignity of persons is to be found in loving care, not pseudo-medical murder.